something that stays

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something that stays

by jublis

Summary

Throughout the years, Todd and Mr. Keating share a copious amount of letters.

Or, the years after Welton.

Notes

i'm back and quarantined babeyyyy

i hope you like this!! the idea came to me while i was talking to molly about how i needed to write about dps more. so here u go! this will probably be a bit longer than my other fics (my first multi-chapter!! wahoo!) so i hope you guys bear with me.

enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

i.

Chapter Summary

> The first letter Todd ever got from Mr. Keating arrives a little bit over two weeks after he's fired from Welton.

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It's been thirty-thousand, two hundred and forty minutes since Neil's attempt; twenty-thousand, one hundred and fifty since Todd stood on top of that table, willing himself not to cry; and seventy-two hundred since he was able to look anyone in the eye. Todd sits by himself in an empty dorm room (Neil's bedsheets, his books, the echo of his laughter - all gone, gone, gone, like Todd had only imagined him, after all), and counts the spaces between one breath and the next.

He can't remember when he started counting in the first place, but it's like he can't stop. His life is clearly cracked in two: who he was before Welton, and who he was after he first landed eyes on Neil Perry and thought, faintly, *'So this is how I'm burnt alive. This is how I burst into flames.'*

(He did. A hundred times, a thousand times, every day. Every smile, every twinkle of the eye, every fluttering of eyelashes, of heart; it was like making friends with the fire.)

Todd blinks; he's been staring at the wall in front of him, unseeing, a piece of crumpled paper in his hand. He almost smiles at the words, at his own handwriting, at his own hopelessness.

Tell me you're staying, it says. *I don't care for how long, just for now. Tell me you're not leaving as long as we're together, and we'll be together for as long as you don't leave.*

Someone knocks, loudly. Todd barely has any time to wipe his eyes, doesn't even open his mouth to say come in, when Charlie opens the door and saunters in anyway, a small pile of letters in one hand and a cigarette in the other, smiling crookedly, the way he always does. Knox follows him, though more gently, and his smile is a little apologetic, as it also always is, these days. They both pointedly don't sit on Neil's bed, or anywhere near it: Charlie sits at Todd's desk and plops his feet up on it, and Knox sits next to Todd on his bed, and

Todd feels - not happy, not calm, but still.

“Mail came in during breakfast,” Charlie says. “You got some, Hagen gave it to me; I swear, it’s been almost nine months, and that prick still can’t tell the difference between us. We don’t even look alike!”

Of course, Hagen didn’t give Todd his mail because Todd wasn’t at breakfast, hasn’t gone to breakfast in days, hasn’t been able to do much of anything. But Charlie doesn’t mention any of it, and Todd smiles weakly.

“Who’re they from?”, he asks, and pretends not to wince at the roughness of his voice.

“Dunno. I didn’t peek,” Charlie answers, taking a drag of his cigarette.

Knox and Todd just stare at him. He waits a beat, two, then exhales a small cloud of smoke.

“Jesus, okay, I took a peek. There’s one from your dearest Mother,” Charlie throws the letters at Todd’s lap as he speaks, “another one from everyone’s wettest dreams, Jeffrey Anderson.”

“Gross,” Todd says.

“I mean, it’s true,” Knox says, smirking. “Good looks run in the family.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure you’ll grow into them soon, Todd,” Charlie says with a barely concealed hint of jealousy, and ignores Knox’s laughter. “Anyway,” he continues. “You’ve got mail from the Captain.”

Something tightens in Todd’s chest. He gulps.

“What, from Mr. Keating?” He laughs, faintly, twisting the hem of his sweater between his hands. “Why would he send anything to me?”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Knox asks, and, *God* - sometimes Todd hates how earnest his friend is, how genuine. It makes him feel even worse about the fact that he doesn’t know how to reciprocate.

Charlie throws the final letter - *John R. Keating*, it says right there, on the cramped and messy handwriting that Todd knows almost better than his own - on Todd’s lap. “Of course he’d write to you, Anderson,” Charlie drawls playfully. “You were his favorite student.”

A protest is half-out of Todd’s mouth before Charlie even finishes

speaking. “No, I *wasn’t*,” he says, so forcefully that Charlie’s smile falls like it was turned off, and it isn’t until Knox touches his arm that Todd realizes he’s been crumpling the letter in his hands, unconsciously. He quickly recovers, straightening his shoulders and smoothing out the rough paper, avoiding his friend's sad eyes and sad words.

“No, I wasn’t,” Todd repeats, quietly. “Neil was.”

Knox knocks his shoulder against Todd’s, a habit of his to call Todd’s attention. It’s so familiar that Todd nearly cries.

“Hey,” Knox says, something fierce in his eyes when Todd meets them. “Neil *is*.”

The breath rushes out of his lungs. Neil *is*. He has to keep reminding himself that Neil is alive, really alive, somehow, and he didn’t just make that up. Neil is alive, and he’s healing, and he’ll come back. Soon.

“Yeah,” Todd whispers, the word catching in his throat. “Yeah.”

There’s a moment in which none of them say anything. Charlie drums his fingers on the desk’s surface. Knox closes his eyes. Todd breathes.

It’s been over three-hundred thousand minutes since he met Neil Perry for the first time, and there’s still so many more minutes for them to know together. And that’s enough, for now.

Todd opens the letter, and tunes out Charlie’s inquisitive glances, or the way he knows Knox is reading over his shoulder. There’s a smudge of - either ink or coffee on the upper left corner of the page, and for some reason, it makes him smile.

Dear Mr. Anderson;

First of all, wipe that baffled look off your face. You should know that I am not, indeed, in the habit of communicating with my former students, especially one as recent as yourself, and I cannot exactly explain the exact reason as to why I’ve decided to write you this letter.

I’ve been teaching for twenty-five years now, Todd - more than you’ve been alive for, time that for you, seems like eons, ages; more time than you could ever hope for. But, to let you in on a secret: it’s no time at all, son. No time at all. I’ve met countless students who’ve forgotten what it means to be alive, what it means to dance under the rain and laugh at your own foolishness, to look at someone you barely know and be in love, to let

yourself fall. And Todd - that's not what I saw in you. I saw someone who'd never known what it was to live, someone terrified at the idea of their own aliveness, someone who'd never let themselves.

This is a long-winded way of saying: I wanted to keep an eye on you. Which means: I want to know how you're doing. Which means: you're supposed to answer this, you mole. A man or an amoeba, Todd? Remember your lessons.

Though I expect to hear from you, I don't expect to be seeing you anytime soon. And no, that's not me being exceptionally rude. I'm moving back to England - I have a whole other life there, you know, one that's still worth saving, and I plan on staying in it. I'll be leaving on two week's time; please, please, do not try to see me before that. If word gets out that I'm even sending anything to a Welton student - we don't want a repeat of what almost happened to Mr. Dalton.

Take care of yourself, Todd.

Yours sincerely,

John Keating (O' Captain, My Captain).

P. S. : I went to visit Neil a couple of days ago, because I wouldn't forgive myself if I left without seeing him again. Of course, his father didn't want to let me in, but his mother told him to back down and shut up - yes, I know. A slip of a woman; I think she was surprised with herself, too. I won't get into many details, because that's Neil's business, but he wants you to know that he misses you. He says you should visit, because his father is growing tired of Charlie, and no one in their right mind could possibly say no to you. I do not want to know what he meant by that last statement.

Todd doesn't realize he's crying until Knox grabs him by the shoulders and pushes him onto his chest, whispering reassurances to him as if he were a little child. Dimly, he notices Charlie sitting at his other side, and they all hold on to each other as Todd sobs, and he can hear Charlie sniffling and trying to hide it, and Knox's voice sounds rough, and everything around him is warm and real and for one moment, Todd isn't counting.

"Well," Charlie speaks up after a while, his voice cracking. "That man should be the next Poet Laureate. Teaching's wasted on him, honestly. I thought I was reading Robert Frost, for a hot second."

"Shut up, Charlie," Knox says, without any heat.

“It’s okay, Knox,” Todd looks up at him, and smiles. Knox is frowning, his eyes red, but he softens a little bit when he sees how genuine Todd looks. “Really. That was just...a lot. But I’m fine. Really.”

Charlie doesn’t sound convinced. “Really?”

Todd opens up his mouth, but closes it. A thought pops into his head, and he - he *wants*.

“Actually,” he says, hesitantly. “Could you guys stay? Just for a bit longer?”

“Until Hagen freaks when we’re not in our room by curfew,” Charlie says cheerfully, taking ahold of Todd’s hand and squeezing it.

Todd huffs his laughter, burrowing further into his friend’s side. “I don’t know how you two even managed to get Hagen to let you two switch rooms so you could be together,” he mumbles. “It’s not like he *likes* either of you. Or trusts Charlie.”

“Shots fired by Todd Anderson,” Knox says, and he sounds almost proud. “I don’t know how we managed that either. Charlie, how did we manage that?”

Charlie doesn’t miss a beat. “My dashing good looks and delightful personality.” He sighs, wistfully. “I gave Hagen thirty bucks and he folded like a goddamn lawn chair.”

Todd giggles, and some reason that inspires Charlie to keep making up absurd ways to how he got Hagen to let him room with Knox, and Todd is so - not happy, but content. Safe. Warm. He’ll burn again someday; there’ll be time for that. He’s not counting, but he knows there will be.

ii.

Chapter Summary

That night, Todd writes to Mr. Keating.

'I think I feel forever about him.'

Chapter Notes

hello again! yes this was fast i'm impressed with myself

i don't know when i'll be able to post the next chapter, because online school is kicking my ass, but hopefully it won't be longer than a week! in the meantime, enjoy a long-ish one :D

quick tw for implied self-harm in this!! it's really just implied but they talk about it, so watch out for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Neil,” Todd calls out. “Have you seen my mezuzah?”

Neil’s head pops out of the bedroom door, frowning. “Your what?”

“My mezuzah. That thing you put on the door jamb, with the prayers? Jeffrey gave me a new one right before we moved, but I can’t find it anywhere.”

“Hang on.” Neil disappears into the bedroom again, and Todd tries not to tap his foot on the floor too impatiently. His eyes slide over to the front door, and he tries to swallow his own embarrassment at how vulnerable he feels knowing there’s nothing there. “So,” Neil continues. “There is a shit ton of boxes in here. It could be anywhere. But it could be *somewhere*.”

Todd rolls his eyes. “Thanks, Neil. That’s very helpful.”

“Don’t get snippy with me, sir.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

There *are* a shit ton of boxes in their bedroom; even though they’d moved in almost three weeks before, it seemed like whenever they thought they’d gotten rid of it all, a new set of boxes would appear in a different room. Todd never even knew he *owned* so many things.

Most of it, of course, were Jeffrey's doing - his brother had taken him out to buy household items (a phrase Todd never, ever thought he would be able to say) almost a month before Neil and Todd left for New York, and it was oddly enlightening about how Jeffrey was living his college years.

"Rule number one," Jeffrey had said, dumping a huge box of plain drinking glasses on the shopping cart. "You can never own too many cups. Or too many bowls. Or too many spoons."

"What about plates?" Todd had said, bemused, trying not to worry about the impending doom of his future.

Jeffrey had actually laughed out loud, clapping Todd on the shoulder. "Oh, little bro. You're such a newbie. Rule number two: *fuck* plates. You can eat food out of anything. Plates are useless."

"So why are we buying so many bowls?"

"For cereal."

"Doesn't cereal qualify as food?"

"Todd," Jeffrey had said, unusually serious. "Cereal is not just food. It is your lifeline. It is heavenly. It is the only thing, let me tell you, the only thing that will keep you from starving."

"I'm glad to know Columbia has taught you surviving skills," Todd had answered. Jeffrey nodded solemnly, with a glint in his eye.

"More than Harvard ever did, that's for sure."

It was still odd to hear Jeffrey talk badly about Harvard, after all the pain he went through to get in. But apparently, after eight months, Jeffrey Anderson, Welton's prime student, valedictorian, the apple of his parents' eye, decided to quit Harvard - where he was sure to major in Business - and transferred to Columbia, New York City, where he changed his field of study to Social Sciences. It was jarring to everyone but Todd, who actually knows his brother. He knows that, as hard as it was for him to grow up in Jeffrey's shadow, his brother didn't exactly have it easy by having to excel in everything he did.

Their parents were never fair to either of them. So, Todd thinks, it's our turn to not be fair to them.

On Neil and Todd's first night at their new apartment, Jeffrey had

showed up with his girlfriend, Maddie, for a housewarming party, and after one too many glasses of wine, toasted, “To being the family disappointments!”

Neil had looked mildly uncomfortable, but Todd cracked up and toasted too. Maddie (“Really, it’s Madalena,” she introduced herself. “But his white ass always butchers my name, so I’ve given up”) stumbled out of their empty kitchen after ten minutes of rummaging around, barefoot, to ask *where the fuck do you kept your chocolate, you people are heathens, what the fuck do you mean you don’t have any.* Todd really, really likes her.

“Todd!” Neil calls out, breaking Todd from his reminiscing, and jumpscaring him so hard that he nearly drops the pile of glass plates (a won battle) he was trying to place in the kitchen cupboard.

“What?” he yells back.

“Come here,” Neil answers, just as loudly.

Their neighbor slams something against the wall. “Shut the fuck up, it’s almost midnight!”

Yeah. Thin walls. They’ll cross that bridge when they get to it.

Their apartment is ridiculously small; Todd can clearly see Neil in their bedroom from the kitchen door, but he walks over there anyway, if only to humor him. Neil is kneeling on the floor in front of his open suitcase, which his still hasn’t unpacked, to Todd’s despair, and there are approximately two dozen ties scattered around on every surface of the room. *Why does he even owns that many ties?* Todd asks himself, leaning against the bedroom door. *He could open a goddamn tie store. A tie factory. Make a living out of ties.*

He’s so sleep deprived. God help him. He scrubs a hand over his face and looks down at Neil, expectantly.

“So.” Neil raises two ties to both sides of his face, as if comparing their color to his skin tone. “Which one?”

Todd tilts his head. “I thought you’d settled on the light blue one last week?”

“Yeah, but I’m still not sure.” Neil says, lowering his hands at staring at them, defeated. “But it’s just so...*blue*.”

“Yes, I’d hope so. It’s a blue tie.”

“Stop *laughing* at my *misery*. I just mean, wouldn’t the red one look more professional? I need to make a good impression, Todd, I can’t lose this job. They’re not easy to come by, you know.”

“Hey,” Todd says, sitting down in front of his boyfriend and trying to catch his eye. Neil’s neck is red, as if he’s ashamed, and he stubbornly keeps fiddling with his ties, keeping his face hidden. Todd has seen that a lot of times since they’ve known each other, but it never fails to make his blood boil. “What’s this really about?”, he asks.

Neil mumbles something, but Todd doesn’t move, staring at him expectantly. Finally, Neil cracks, letting his head tip back with a frustrated groan. Todd suppresses a grin - he’s gotten too good at making Neil talk about his feelings. It’s making him cocky.

“It’s just,” Neil starts, “I don’t know. You’ve got a job already; you’re going to college, too, in a week, and you’re gonna make something of yourself, and I’ve been sitting on my ass for a month, not getting jobs the way I told you I would, and I just. I know you believe in me,” he finishes, almost in a whisper, “and I don’t want to let you down. I want to make something of *myself,* too.”

“My sweet,” he says, quietly, taking Neil’s hand. “You never let me down.”

Neil smiles at him, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Don’t I?”

Todd wants to rip that smile out of his face, because it doesn’t belong there. Neil’s smile is warm, it makes his eyes crinkle and almost close, and he has a dimple on the right side of his face. That smile is not the smile Todd is seeing; this smile is a Welton smile, a perfect smile, a crafted one. Todd raises his hand to Neil’s face, and tugs lightly at his cheek, until that smile falls away.

“No,” Todd says. “You *don’t.*”

They both know what they’re talking about, even without saying it. The weeks after Neil left the hospital were uncertain, shaky, like a little kid’s drawing, with the lines overlapping each other and the colors in the wrong places. Neil went back to Welton, but he worked on odd hours, both because he wasn’t allowed to frequent more than five classes a day, and because he couldn’t sleep. Todd once woke up at five in the morning to see Neil sitting at his desk, just looking at him. Todd had nearly jumped out of his skin, but he managed to not

make his voice waver.

“What’re you doin’?” he’d mumbled, sleepily.

Neil just looked at him, though Todd wasn’t certain he could see anything in the low light. Finally, he’d said, “Trying not to.”

“Not to what?” When Neil didn’t answer right away, Todd had sat up and scooted closer, suddenly wide awake. “Neil,” he said, still quiet, but forcefully, “not to *what*?”

Neil breathed a laugh, but his lips didn’t even move with it. He just stared at Todd with bottomless eyes, and they looked so different to what they always looked in the daylight, as if they, too, darkened when the sun left. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his skin looked sickly pale even in the dark, and his hair was unkempt, but Todd looked at Neil and all he could think was *fire, fire, fire.*

“I think there’s something wrong with me,” Neil had said, later, when Todd was curled up next to him on his bed. “Like something under my skin wants to burst. To break.” Todd hadn’t answered, just hummed to let Neil know he was listening. “And sometimes I try to let it out. It doesn’t work on the long run, but it helps.”

“Does anyone else know?” Todd had asked.

“Charlie. The school nurse. You, now.” Neil didn’t look at him, but his breath rattled on his ribcage. “Keep an eye on me, okay?” He’d mumbled. “I’ll hate you for it when it happens, but it’s the right thing to do.”

Here, five months later, Todd holds Neil’s face with both of his hands, and looks him in the eye. It took him such a long time to be able to do it so freely - he hopes Neil will understand that shows how genuine he is.

“Neil Perry,” Todd says. “Neither of us are the people our parents wished we were. We are one hundred and eighty-eight miles from where they expected us to be. But guess what, Neil. They’re not here. *We* are. In a shitty one-bedroom that’s twenty feet away from the closest Ballroom, and our neighbor’s a drag queen with a pet snake, and I’m going to the college I chose to, and you’re not going to college because that’s not what you want.” He runs his fingers under Neil’s eyes, as if he can wipe away the dark circles and stress marks there. “You’re going to that audition tomorrow, and you’re going to blow the casting director’s mind, because you’re Neil, and that’s what you do.”

“Give damn good head?” Neil deadpans, but he’s smiling. *Oh,* Todd thinks. *There he is.* Then he realizes what Neil said and shoves him away, with barely concealed laughter.

“No, you pervert!” Todd squeals. “I mean, be a phenomenal actor. The part is yours, my sweet. You will get it.”

“And if I don’t?” Neil asks, frowning.

“Then you didn’t,” Todd replies easily. “There’ll always be more auditions. This is New York City - everyone here needs someone to play a part for them. There’s no rush for you.”

Neil stares at him, silently, for a couple seconds. Then he takes Todd’s hand, and says, as if it’s the simplest thing in the world, “I’m proud of you.”

Todd startles. “*What*?” His voice is so disbelieving he almost doesn’t recognize the word coming out of his mouth. “Why?”

And Neil, stupid Neil, infuriating Neil, grins, and pecks him on the lips. He turns around to his suitcase and says, “I think I’ll go with the blue one, then.”

Todd just looks at him, bewildered. His chest is...not burning like he usually feels about Neil, but warm. And Todd is looking at this boy who’d somehow carved his way into his life and chose to stay, who’d made him laugh harder than he ever did before, who’d made him feel brave - something in Todd’s mind clicks.

Oh.

That night, Todd writes to Mr. Keating.

It’s not the first time he does; he *did* have to answer that first letter Keating sent him, and two more followed since then, but it’s the first time Todd decides to write simply because he can’t think of anyone else he’d rather talk to at the moment than Mr. Keating. And somehow, that thought doesn’t scare him or embarasses him. It just is. Somehow, along the way, Mr. Keating just was in Todd’s life, the same way Neil was, the same way Jeffrey was, and Knox, and Charlie. He wouldn’t say the word *friendship* yet, he never would, but he likes to think they’re working towards it.

It’s late. He knows that much. Late enough that he should probably

call it early. Neil has been asleep for hours, and there's a hazy sort of light filtering through their bedroom window that gives the entire room a dreamlike appearance, as if it'd all disappear if Todd blinked. But he feels real, for once, not like a shadow about to vanish, not like a reflection in the mirror, gone before you know it. He's there, squinting his eyes to write in the low light, trying not to let ink bleed into his sheets, and trying not to move so he doesn't wake Neil up.

Dear Mr. Keating;

I think I feel forever about him.

I apologize; I know that's not the most conventional way to start a letter, but I had to write that down before I changed my mind. It just hit me. I know I sound foolish, and young, but, Mr. Keating, I don't think I could ever not be with him. And I'm not scared. And I don't know what that means.

Forgive me for my atrocious handwriting; one would think I'd have learned by now not to write in unconventional ways, but really, if I ever do make it, I think unconventional is the most likely word to be used to describe me.

There's no ulterior motive to this letter. I just wanted to tell you, because I don't know who else I could tell. Charlie would say I gave him cavities. Knox is the least articulate person I know when it comes to emotion, and my brother isn't much better. But if I am honest, sir, I wanted to tell you. Because you will understand what I mean when I say I haven't been given enough words to describe what I feel; metaphors fall short - you can never just say. The. Thing. I used to think that if I wrote enough words, I could write up something that could love me too, or at least stay when I faltered. And maybe it is tempting fate to say, but I think I've found it. I think I've found it.

I was terrified of fire when I was a child, you know. I never imagined I would fall in love with it. He's a fever I'm learning to live with, a delirious and wonderful dream I'm still trying to grasp. I feel like my heart has grown three sizes, but maybe it hasn't - maybe it's always been like this, beating, frantic, alive, and I've never let myself believe it deserved to, but I do, now. I think I do.

I don't expect an answer. I don't know what I expect, really.

Sincerely,

Todd Anderson.

He looks at Neil’s silhouette, just barely discernible, and smiles. He stops by the post office on his way to work later that morning, and his heart thunders.

Chapter End Notes

so that was something! honestly i loved writing it a lot jhsjkjhs it took me a bit longer than it usually does (like two hours ish) and i'm pretty proud of it!

to clear some things up - when todd says "we're one hundred and eighty-eight miles from where they expected us to be": that's the distence between harvard and nyc! also, the innuendos were not that intentional, but they're there because quarantine has been rough (you would know, molly)

as always, comments and kudos are appreciated! follow me on twitter if u want @queenofvolts, stay home, wash your hands, and take care of yourselves!!

iii.

Chapter Summary

> And so he breathes in once, twice, and he looks for the bitterness he's used to holding deep in his chest, sour and demanding and pulsing like the beat of a second heart.
>
> He doesn't find any.
>
> He breathes out.

Chapter Notes

> hi hello!! so for starters! this chapter is really dialogue heavy, so i hope y'all are cool with that. also this is a bit long but well. i had fun writing it. no warnings for this one, except for like, period-typical homophobia.
>
> oh! and one joke that charlie makes specifically references the last work in this series (our bodies, possessed by light), so if you want to understand that, feel free to read it!
>
> enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox inhales, looking around the room. "Wow," he says, quietly. "It's like nothing's changed since we left."

"Yeah," Charlie agrees easily, taking a sip from his champagne. "You can still smell the sweet aroma of sexually repressed teenage boys. It's just as depressing as it used to be."

"I'll drink to that," Neil says.

Todd shakes his head, too nervous to be amused by his friends' banter. It's the first time he steps inside Welton in over a decade, and needless to say, he is not thrilled to be doing so. But, well - years came and years went, and suddenly, it's been ten years since he graduated, and he gets a letter in the mail addressed to one Mr. T. Anderson, inviting him for the ten-year reunion of the Welton graduating class of 1960.

He still can't believe it's been ten years. Todd tightens his hand into a fist. It's been - what? He hasn't been counting, he realizes with a start.

He hasn't been, but being in this place - these haunted halls, these haunted people, nothing changed, and he's changed so much, but being here and breathing this air makes him feel like he somehow made up his entire life up until then, as if he's seventeen again, and small, and scared, and tearing apart at the seams.

Over five million minutes, he thinks. *It's been over five million minutes since I've been here. So why does it feel like no time at all?*

Oddly, it reminds him of something Keating wrote to him once, years ago. *It's no time at all. No time at all.*

"Todd," Neil's voice reaches his ears,and Todd looks up suddenly. Knox and Charlie are standing a few feet away, greeting people he vaguely recognizes, and giving them space. Neil looks worried - there are faint lines around his eyes, barely noticeable, and a few stray gray hairs around his temples, and it's been five million minutes and neither of them belong here anymore.

"Neil," he says, and surprises himself with how steady his voice is.

"You okay?"

"You know, I should probably be the one asking that question."

Neil shrugs. "This doesn't mean anything. It's just a performance for a show I particularly hate." He smiles. "Think we can do it together this time?"

Todd straightens his shoulders, smooths his tie. He smiles back at Neil, and it's like a paradox. "Let's break a leg."

"Please, don't," Charlie interrupts, waltzing into the conversation as if he belongs there, like he always does. "We don't need any more accidents today."

"What other accidents have we had?" Todd asks.

"Meeks' tie," Charlie answers, pointing. Across the hall from them, talking to a man Todd doesn't recognize, is decidedly Steven Meeks, in all his ginger glory - and a shocking deep blue tie with yellow polka dots in it.

It's not that Todd hasn't kept in touch with him over the years; in fact, Meeks was at the Thanksgiving dinner he and Neil hosted in their apartment just last year, as well as Pitts, who'd entertained and mildly

horrified them all with a retelling of how he had obtained his latest tattoo (a shockingly realistic rendition of the male anatomy, located too far down his back, that all of them wish they hadn't seen.) But he's the only one of his friends that didn't end up living in New York City in one way or the other, so consequently, he's the one Todd sees less of.

It's always jarring to see him, too; Todd and Neil have a theory that Meeks is immortal ("Probably a vampire," Neil said, once. "That explains the sickly pale skin and the weird moral compass,"), mostly because he hasn't aged a day since they left Welton. It's scary, almost.

"Meeks!" Neil exclaims, giddily ignoring that most conversations stop and multiple heads turn to look at him. "Get your ass over here!"

Meeks startles, but brightens when he sees them. He apologizes to whoever he's talking to, and tugs on the arm of the man behind him - Pitts. Of course it is. They both walk over, and conversations hesitantly resume around them. Something flutters in Todd's chest, looking at Neil's smile, and it's not nervousness.

His fingers have been dancing around Neil's for the better part of twenty minutes now. Todd itches to intertwine them, to stand just one step closer, to lean his head on Neil's shoulder. His fist tightens again.

"Hey there, fellas," Meeks says, grinning, as he reaches them. "How do you do?"

"What's up," Pitts says in that deep voice of his, but he's also smiling like a little kid who's just gotten a new bike.

"Oh, forgive me," Charlie says just a tad too loudly, handing his now empty glass to a resigned Knox, who merely sighs. "Mr. Meeks, Mr. Pitts. It's been so long since we've had the pleasure of enjoying your company! I'm sure you can barely remember us, mere mortals, looking down at us from your holiest seat in the M.I.T. Olympus. But not to worry!" Charlie bows dramatically. "We'll introduce ourselves."

Neil's mouth is hanging slightly open. Knox rubs a hand over his face, tiredly. Meeks takes a long sip of his drink, one eyebrow primly raised, and Pitts closes his eyes. Todd is a little bit in love with all of them, in that moment.

"First of all!" Charlie half says, half yells, taking ahold of Neil by the shoulders. "Neil Charlotte Perry, our theater extraordinaire. Eight Broadway credits, ex-Rockette, and Edward Kleban's inspiration for

the character of Diana Morales in the hit musical 'A Chorus Line.'"

"That's not my middle name," Neil says, "and literally everything you said is wrong. Also, that musical doesn't exist."

Charlie claps him on the shoulder, unconcerned. "Of course it does! Anyway," he moves on to Knox before Neil can reply. "We have Knoxious Overstreet...xious. Hopeless romantic and yet emotionally inarticulate. How does he do it? Who knows!"

"I can't believe I live with you," Knox mutters. "I chose this. This is my fault." Todd pats him on the shoulder.

"*And!*" Charlie is positively yelling by then. He slings an arm around Todd's shoulders and tugs him closer, and Todd takes back what he thought before. He hates him. "Todd Anderson," Charlie announces, smirking. "Criminal mastermind."

Then he breaks down laughing, as if he hasn't said that to Todd literally every time they've seen each other since past June.

"Wow, Charlie, that's so original," Todd says. "How long did it take for you to come up with it?"

"I think he wasted a month's worth of brain cells," Knox says, and he doesn't sound like he's joking.

Meeks looks at Neil. "Are you sure *you're* the drama kid?"

"I'm not sure of anything," quips Neil, "but I am sure that why Charlie never invested in theater is the mystery that baffles us all."

"What's he doing these days?" Pitts asks Todd, because Charlie's too busy trying to convince Knox to sneak out with him to answer.

Todd shrugs. "No one knows," he says, and Pitts nods, and that's the end of it.

He, Meeks and Pitts chat idly for a while, the three of them tuning out Knox and Neil's efforts to keep a tipsy Charlie under control. After about three times that Todd had to bite the inside of his cheek so he doesn't burst out laughing in the middle of the conversation, Neil nudges him, and Todd looks, because it's *Neil*.

There are laugh lines around Neil's eyes. Todd smothers out the want he feels to run his fingers over them. After a decade of Greenwich

Village, and Christopher Street, and New York, he has to remind himself that this is what being in public means.

“Todd,” Neil says, and Todd just knows he meant to say *honey*, “please, can you go fetch some water? We need to sober him up before he says any more shit.”

Charlie is currently half-draped over Knox, giggling. Knox looks fond, but also - his eyes keep darting over the room, and no one’s looking at them, but there’s always the threat that there might be. Todd nods, and quickly retreats. He hears Charlie yelp something like “Treason!”, and then he’s out of earshot.

Todd crosses the salon quickly, avoiding looking anyone in the eye so as to not invite any unwanted conversations. Because yes, he’s made progress, but not in Welton, and not with these people. *It’s fine*, he thinks to himself. *You’re not here anymore. Not in the way that matters.*

He fills a glass of champagne with water, breathes, and when he turns around, Richard Cameron is standing right there, looking at him with a slight frown on his face.

They stare at each other, five million minutes between them. And, as if to prove that time has passed, Todd surprises both of them by being the first to break the silence.

“Hey, Cameron,” he says. And stops. Something in his chest tightens.

Cameron clears his throat. “Hey, Anderson.”

None of them say anything.

“What are you doing these days?” Cameron asks, because that’s what he’s supposed to do. He crosses his arms and looks at Todd, but doesn’t really look at him.

“Oh, you know,” Todd answers. “This and that. Writing, mostly.”

“That’s nice,” Cameron says.

“And you?”

“Oh,” and odd smile spreads over Cameron’s face, as if he wasn’t expecting the question. “I’m teaching here, actually. Geometry. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Pretty cool,” Todd echoes. He looks askance, trying to see if he can

find Neil to get him out of this situation, but of course, across the room, Neil has one arm around Charlie's shoulder, trying to look like he's doing it casually instead of just holding Charlie up. Knox catches Todd's eye, and mouths, *hurry*.

Cameron follows his gaze, and something in his expression twitches. "You still talk to them a lot? The rest of the guys?"

Todd nods. "Yeah. Most of us wound up somewhere in New York, so we see each other pretty often."

"Neil too?" Cameron says, sipping his own glass of wine. And - Todd logically knows it probably doesn't mean anything, because Cameron can't possibly know, but something in his voice makes Todd halt.

He looks him in the eye when he answers. "Yes. Neil too. Constantly, I'd say."

Cameron nods, and doesn't push. Todd excuses himself, and walks away as fast as he can without running. He hands the glass of water to Knox, looks at Neil, and walks out of the salon.

His hands aren't shaking, but he feels like he should be. He'd hated Cameron for a long time - for the way he ratted them out, betrayed their trust; the comments, and the glances, and the disgusting jokes. Most of all, Todd hated the way Cameron had made him feel *small*. Of course, he had always been inside a shadow, but even so, he was still allowed to take up space. And next to Cameron...well, he wasn't.

(Todd and Neil had talked about it once, late at night. They never did dwell much on talk about Welton, especially if it didn't have to do with their friends or Mr. Keating, but the subject came up anyway. Todd hadn't cried - he couldn't, tears always got lost somewhere between his chest and his eyes, and he could never find them, even if he wanted to - but Neil had pulled him against his chest.

"I love the way you take up space," Neil had said, between chaste kisses, and Todd had buried his face in the crook of his neck.)

Even so. As much as Welton makes Todd feel like a ghost haunting his own body, he knows he isn't, not anymore. And so he breathes in once, twice, and he looks for the bitterness he's used to holding deep in his chest, sour and demanding and pulsing like the beat of a second heart.

He doesn't find any.

He breathes out.

Neil finds him sitting on the steps that lead to the front door, looking ahead. “Honey,” he says, squeezing Todd’s shoulder as he sits down next to him. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Todd says, and it’s true. He looks at Neil, and gives him a shy smile. “I think I just realized something.”

Neil tilts his head. “A good something?”

“I think so.”

“And what’s that?”

“I love you.”

Neil blinks. It’s not like they haven’t said it to each other before - in fact, he’s pretty sure Neil cried the first time Todd said it - but never out in the open, never so close to their past. Something flickers in Neil’s eyes, and it doesn’t all look like worry.

“I love you too,” he says, quietly. He takes one of Todd’s hands in both of his, and Todd moves forward so that their foreheads are close enough to touch.

To touch would be dangerous. To touch would be risking something they’d fought to make holy.

Todd kisses him.

Just a peck, and when he pulls away, Neil looks dazed.

“Must’ve been one hell of a something,” he whispers.

“Yeah,” Todd answers. “Must’ve been.”

Later - specifically, one car drive to a shitty diner where Charlie, still tipsy, ordered a plateful of bacon and started crying when he remembered neither Todd nor Knox could eat it, and another one back to New York City, where they all collectively gave up and decided to crash and Todd and Neil’s apartment - Todd starts writing a letter to Mr. Keating.

It started about six years ago, the tradition to just write down something new that they’ve learned and send to each other. *That way,*

Mr. Keating had written, *neither of us will grow old. Maybe up, but not old.*

So Todd jumps over Pitts' slumped sleeping form in the path between their bedroom and their living room sofa, which gets better lightning from the street, sits down, and begins.

Dear Mr. Keating;

You never taught us about forgiveness.

I just realized that. On our way back home from the Welton reunion (that's a story for a whole different letter), I looked out the window and realized that I'd been searching for a lesson of yours, something you'd said, or quoted, looking for another's words to tell me, it's okay. Someone has felt this before.

But I couldn't, because you didn't. So now I have to do the hardest thing of all: find my own words.

Does forgiveness ever get easier?, I used to ask myself. I'd feel this ugly thing, this twisted and bitter and rotting thing in the back of my throat, this sickness of resentment, and ask myself, when can I let go of it?

You can't. It festers and bleeds and throbs and you can't let it go, as long as it doesn't let go of you. And then, one day, it's been decades, and years, and months, and days, and hours, and minutes, so many minutes - and you haven't seen that one speck of rot, that one awful thing that makes you human for a while. And the wound hasn't healed, not exactly, but you look at the person who cut you and it doesn't ache. You just feel sad. And a little wistful. Maybe, if you're a romantic (like me, or yourself), you'll feel a little nostalgic, too, because we always fall in love with pain. We all love that which is our loss.

We would know, wouldn't we? We would know.

Yours sincerely,

Todd Anderson.

"Todd?"

Neil looks at him blearily, a shadow in a shadowy hallway, looking soft in his sweatpants and loose t-shirt. "Come back to bed," he says.

Todd does.

Chapter End Notes

hi again! so that was something. this is the longest one yet and i genuinely do not know where i pulled it from. but i'm pretty proud of it.

thank you to molly for being the most enthusiastic beta reader i could ever ask for! thank *you* for reading! as always, comments and kudos make my little heart sing.

i don't want to promise anything, but the next chapter will probably be up somewhere between this weekend and the beginning of next week. yeah :D

vi.

Chapter Summary

> Keating looks at him, warmly, and puts a hand on his arm. “You know what I mean. You’ve already taught me about forgiveness. And now it’s my turn to teach you about letting go.”
>
> He pulls out a small envelope from his pocket, and puts it in Todd’s hand. “Read this later,” Keating says. “It’s for both of you.” He doesn’t have to say who. He squeezes Todd’s arm once more, and says, “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Mr. Anderson. There’s still time for both of us.”

Chapter Notes

> hey everyone!!! the end is drawing near so i made this one longer than usual for your enjoyment :D (i actually just couldn't stop writing so like. take it.)
>
> oh, just a comment: when i say "marry," pls know i am aware gay marriage was illegal back then, but i know many couples considered themselves married anyway. that's it.
>
> no warnings for this one! it's a little angstier than these past chapters but like, in a good way??? idk i can't explain it. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd sees Mr. Keating in the flesh for the first time somewhere around sixteen years after they’d both left Welton, on the best night of Todd’s life.

Rather, it’s supposed to be the best night of *Neil’s* life, but these days, Todd finds that there isn’t really much of a difference. They’ve been together for so long now that it almost feels daunting, definitive in a way Todd never expected for anything in his life to be. They’re past the point of anyone telling them that it’s just a whim, or a phase, or something they’ll regret when they’re older, because they *are* older. And Todd Anderson is in love with Neil Perry, and Neil Perry is in love with Todd Anderson, and the sun rises everyday, and raindrops fall from the sky.

He’s long ago given up on pretending he isn’t a romantic, even in front of Charlie. He doesn’t have the strength to feel embarrassed about the

way he experiences life; he doesn't have the will to pretend he's not in constant awe of the world around him. At least, that's how Todd has felt ever since he left the publishing company he worked for, and invested in a career as a full-time freelance writer. His daily job was, mostly, standing still and learning to be astonished.

"So you're a poet," Madalena had said once, when they visited hers and Jeffrey's apartment for dinner.

Todd had shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Freelance writer," he says, avoiding looking at Neil.

Madalena patted his hand. "Is that what you're telling your mother?"

"He's a poet," Neil had said. He'd intertwined his pinky finger with Todd's under the table. Then he'd ruined the moment by continuing, "And I think that's very sexy of him."

Todd had physically fled the room.

But now it's seven months later, and his brother is expecting a child, and Neil is making his Broadway debut that very night, and somehow, Charlie is more nervous than all of them.

For old times' sake, they'd agreed to have a sleepover at Todd and Neil's place over the weekend—Neil had finally stopped complaining about how they always used their apartment for ordeals like this, as if Charlie and Knox didn't live together just south of Christopher Street —, before the opening night. And so far, it had consisted on thirty-six hours of reminiscing, alcohol, copious amounts of sugar, spontaneous bursts of giggling, and Charlie fussing over Neil as if he were a newborn child.

"Charlie, dear," Knox says, between sips of hot chocolate. "I think Neil might need another blanket. It's a rather cold night, isn't it? We don't want him catching a cold right before the big day."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," Charlie muses, worrying at his lip. "Maybe I oughta. Just one more comforter."

"Charlie, no," Neil says, slightly muffled, eyes widening in horror, which is really the only thing they can see of him in the cocoon of blankets and pillows Charlie has been engulfing him in for the past hour.

"Charlie, *yes*," Todd says, giggling. He and Knox fist-bump each other.

Neil glares at them while Charlie retreats to Todd and Neil's bedroom, likely looking for another piece of bedspread he hasn't used to shield Neil from the outside world. Usually Todd would consider this an invasion of privacy, but it feels good not to take himself seriously.

"I'm glad you find this amusing," Neil grumbles.

"I'm glad too," Knox replies.

It's early morning, and it *is* actually pretty cold, but because of Neil's job, they do have a decent heating system, which hasn't stopped Charlie thus far; once he gets into Mother Hen mode, he becomes a force of nature. Todd himself has only witnessed it in rare occasions: that time Knox got pneumonia; the day after Todd was arrested; when Meeks got himself in the hospital for neglecting to drink or eat while working on a project; and now, eighteen hours before Neil steps on a Broadway stage for the first time.

Knox likes to say that, inevitably, he did marry a younger version of his own mother. "A typical Yiddish Mother," he tells Todd once again, watching Charlie safely place another blanket around Neil's shoulders. "Overbearing, overprotective and dramatic. Except not Jewish, and male."

"Your mother isn't Yiddish," Todd comments.

"That's not her fault."

Neil swats Charlie's hands away. "Okay, stop, stop, stop. I'm fine. I'll be fine! The show is great! I'm great! I'm not gonna die before tonight!"

"But you might," says Charlie.

"Yeah, just like I *might* drop dead right this instant. Seriously, you're stressing me out. Just chill, okay?"

Dejected, Charlie sits down on a comforter that's been used as a carpet for the past two days. "I'm just worried," he says. "This is *big*."

They all fall silent. Todd may talk about how emotionally inarticulate Knox is, or how unwilling to discuss human emotions Meeks is, but the person whom he has never heard talk about his own feelings is Charlie Dalton. It's unexpected, and yet expected of him. They've all grown somewhat in the past sixteen years. Todd bites his own lip, and tries not to count the minutes.

Neil, somehow, detangles himself from the blanket and flops down on the couch next to Charlie. He puts his arms around him, and their foreheads touch. It's nothing short of fraternal; Charlie and Neil have been best friends since they were children, and it has never been Todd's place to be jealous of what they have.

"Yeah, this is big," Neil agrees quietly, resting his head on Charlie's shoulder, who closes his eyes. "Biggest thing ever. But it's also wonderful, and completely insane, and—" he trails off, as if he's just realized something. "I'm happy," he says. "I'm so, so happy right now. Just be happy for me too, okay?"

"Dude," Knox says, "old age has turned you into a *sap*."

But his eyes are a little misty, and when he flings himself onto the both of them, the laugh he lets out sounds more like a sob.

Over the human pile, Neil meets Todd's eyes, and smiles. Todd smiles back, feeling almost dizzy with love. He knows how hard it has been for Neil to reach a place in which he can utter the words I'm happy and mean them, how hard it has been for both of them to live through the passive-aggressive phone calls home, or the dwindling number of letters from Todd's parents, and the way Neil had cried when his mother told him his father had passed away overnight, victim of a heart attack.

("I'm not sad," Neil had said between sobs, Todd holding onto him for dear life. "I'm relieved. My soul, my love, I'm so, so relieved.)

But right now, sitting on the sunlit floor of an apartment that's theirs, surrounded by people he loves, and on the edge of turning thirty-four, Todd feels like all in all, his life turned out pretty great.

That night, when Neil is taking his bows, Todd is crying so hard that Knox has to hug him so he doesn't accidentally hurt himself with the force of his own sobs. And he feels a little silly, but he also knows that Meeks physically left his seat to weep silently in the entrance hallway of the theatre at least twice (Todd caught him, the second time), so he doesn't think anyone will judge him.

The play was a wild and slightly dizzying retelling of the troubled relationship between a man and his wife, with two younger newlyweds meant to parallel them. Neil played the younger man, and God—it made Todd breathless to think about. It'd take him a little bit longer to be able to form the words he needed. In the meantime - if

they did end up making home that night—there were other ways for Todd to show Neil what he thought.

Neil had instructed them all to meet him at the stage door when the show was finished, so they could head to the opening night party (which was being held in some fancy salon on East 48th street) together. So Charlie strings them all along in a line—"Hold hands! Yes, that's what I said, hold each other's hands so we don't lose anyone! What are you guys, five?"—and leads the way, until he suddenly stops, halfway out into the street, which makes Knox walk headfirst into his back, and Todd trip on his own two feet, pulling Meeks and Pitts along.

"Charlie, what the fuck," Todd says.

"Shut up," Charlie says, his voice disbelieving. "Oh, fuck me. Do my eyes deceive me, or is that the *Captain* ?"

All their heads move simultaneously to follow Charlie's gaze. Todd gapes: standing right next to the stage door, a program in his hands and a his trademark playful smile on his face, is Mr. Keating. He looks older, Todd notices, with a certain amount of shock. His hair is almost completely white now, and though his hand doesn't tremble when he waves at them, there are fine wrinkles covering most of his skin. It shouldn't shock him that time has passed; Todd knows that more than anyone. But there's something a little wistful, and a little sad, and just plain weird so see the marks the years have left in his old professor's face.

"Well then," Mr. Keating says when they finally approach him, all hesitant like school children, as if the simple sight of him made them all turn seventeen again. "I thought you'd make me wait all night."

"Mr. Keating," Todd says, grinning like he can't help himself. "What are you *doing* here?"

Mr. Keating raises an eyebrow. "Should I be offended, Mr. Anderson?"

"God, no! No, I mean—" he stammers, but stops when he sees Mr. Keating smiling at him. "It's good to see you, sir."

"It's good to see you all too, gentlemen. Now tell me, Mr. Dalton," he says, turning to Charlie. "What in God's name have you got on your face?"

Charlie rubs his cheek. "It's a beard," he says. "I wear a beard now.

Beards are cool."

"No they're not, dear," Knox says, the pet name like a reflex, and he freezes slightly, looking at Mr. Keating. "I mean—"

But Mr. Keating doesn't even look fazed. "For Mr. Overstreet's sake, Dalton, get rid of it."

Charlie laughs, and it's like a spell is broken: Meeks and Pitts launch into a dramatic retelling of how they nearly didn't make it in time for the first act (Meeks had fallen asleep at his office the day before, and with no word from him until mid-morning, Pitts had called the police, thinking him missing), and Charlie makes fun of Todd for how much he cried during the play, and Knox starts passing around a flask of bourbon while they all wait for Neil to come out.

When he does, Todd makes a beeline for him. Neil's face looks flushed, his eyes bright and hair windswept, and Todd hugs him so tight it knocks the breath out of both of them.

"You did it," he mumbles. "You fucking did it."

Neil laughs into Todd's hair. "I fucking did." He pulls away a little, still keeping Todd at arm's length. Todd's hands are buried into the pockets of Neil's coat, and Neil's arms are around Todd's waist, and they really do need to step away from each other before anyone starts asking questions.

Todd's gaze flickers down to Neil's lips, then up again to his eyes. "I wish I could kiss you right now," he whispers.

Neil smiles a little wistfully. "That makes two of us."

"Anderson," Charlie calls. "Could you step away from the Broadway star, please? I need to tell him something."

Todd steps away, flushing, but everyone's smiling, and no one else besides who matters seem to have witnessed that.

Charlie takes two long strides to Neil, punches him in the chest, and promptly bursts out crying, throwing his arms around him. "You *asshole*," Charlie sobs. "That was amazing, you talented piece of shit."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Mr. Keating says, amused, and Neil jolts as if electrocuted, finally noticing him. He mutters something to Charlie, who pulls away, wiping at his eyes, and walks

straight into Knox's open arms.

"Mr. Keating!" Neil exclaims, a delighted look on his face. "I didn't know you were gonna be here! You didn't tell us anything!"

"That would ruin the whole point of the surprise, wouldn't it, son?"

Something flickers in Neil's expression at the word *son*, but Todd is pretty sure he's the only one who catches it.

"Neil," Mr. Keating says. "You were good. You were really good."

Neil bites his lip, the way he does when considering something, then envelops Mr. Keating in a hug. Todd watches the scene with a sense of finality, as if something has finally slipped into place after being askew for too long.

After a few more heartfelt declarations, they all make their way down 45th street up to the salon, electing to walk instead of arriving in fancy cars like most of Neil's castmates would be doing. The night is cool and crisp, full of flickering lights that look more like stars than anything human made, and Todd walks behind Neil, who's telling Charlie and Meeks about the backstage pranks he and his standby started pulling on the actresses this past week. He watches Neil's outline, soaks in his laughter, and his hands tighten into a fist inside his own pockets.

Mr. Keating slows down his pace to walk next to Todd. Neither of them say anything for a few moments, but then the older man breaks the silence.

"I feel like this is the point where, if this were a story, I'd offer you a wise piece of advice about the intricacies of life," he says, smiling softly. "But to be honest, Todd, I think you're way more well-versed in that subject than I am."

Todd shrugs. "I don't think so. I think life is what we make of it. Travel is the traveller, am I right?"

Keating laughs. "I assume you've been reading the books I've told you to?"

"You were my teacher. Old habits die hard. Besides," Todd lifts his gaze to meet Keating's eye. "We both know what it means to talk about a book, to talk of poetry. It's just a veiled way of talking about yourself when you don't feel brave enough to."

“I suppose you’re right,” Keating says. Then, “I feel I shouldn’t’ve come. I belong to a part of your past that has no place anymore in your life, Todd. The letters are what I’ve allowed myself, but I’m not quite sure either of us need them anymore.”

Something twists in Todd’s chest, not unlike grief, but not that close to sadness. “Are you breaking up with me?” He tries to joke, but it falls flat.

Keating looks at him, warmly, and puts a hand on his arm. “You know what I mean. You’ve already taught me about forgiveness. And now it’s my turn to teach you about letting go.”

He pulls out a small envelope from his pocket, and puts it in Todd’s hand. “Read this later,” Keating says. “It’s for both of you.” He doesn’t have to say who. He squeezes Todd’s arm once more, and says, “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Mr. Anderson. There’s still time for both of us.”

Then he whistles, hailing a cab. Todd tells Neil Mr. Keating felt tired, and decided to leave before he could ruin their night.

Todd won’t see him again. It doesn’t sit right on his chest, but he knows it’s true.

They don’t make it home that night.

Neil and Todd stumble into their little Greenwich apartment—which they never had the heart to move out from—somewhere around seven A.M., and they’re both too overwhelmed and buzzed to do anything but boil some tea and fall next to each other on the couch, their legs tangled together.

“So that was something,” Neil mumbles. There’s a stain of pink lipstick on his cheek, because they ran into their neighbor, Lana, on their way up, and she’d gotten a little enthusiastic in congratulating him. Todd finds it adorable.

“There’ll be many more,” Todd says.

Neil snorts, and takes a sip of his tea.

Suddenly, Todd remembers the envelope. “Oh, wait!” He scrambles for it in his pocket, cursing himself for forgetting.

Neil watches him curiously. “Are you going to propose?” He asks. “Cause if you are, you should know Charlie and Pitts are losing fifty bucks to Knox.”

“Shut up,” Todd says, because he’s not going to think about that right now. He finds the God forsaken note, a little crumpled, but overall still whole. “Keating gave me this before he left,” he says. “Told me it was for both of us.”

“I’m honored to be included in your weird correspondence dynamic,” Neil says, scooting closer. Todd shows him his tongue, and Neil pushes his face away, laughing. “Go on, then,” he says. “What does it say?”

Todd clears his throat.

Dear Neil and Todd;

There is one thing I have wanted to tell you both, all this time I’ve known you, but I’ve refrained myself from doing so. After all, you two are so young, so painfully young, and I say that with the utmost amount of respect. I am not a religious man, but I do believe it to be sinful to make someone acknowledge their own mortality before they’ve even lived, so I’ve waited, and waited.

I’ve grown old. There’s no getting around that, and I ask both of you to not feel sad when I’m gone. Mourn me, scream at my memory, yell all the things you never got the chance to tell me. But do not feel sad. It would do none of us any good.

A friend of mine told me once, “To live in this world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your life depends on it; and, when the time comes, to let it go.” I find these words quite true. They don’t tell you letting go is a good thing, or a happy thing; it is simply a thing of life, something necessary to keep the wheel turning.

Of course it hurts. We’re alive; what doesn’t? To leave is to die a little, as I’ve so often been told, and as I now tell you two.

Do with this as you will. Think about it, if you must. Remember it, if you can. And when the time is right, leave it where it belongs.

Sincerely,

Your Captain.

Neither of them say anything. They don’t have to.

For the first time since he was a teenager, Todd cries with grief. And Neil holds him, and holds him, and holds him.

Chapter End Notes

SO THAT WAS. a whole ass ride i cried writing it. honestly i was flying blind i didn't expect half of it. anyway, here's to gratuitous mary oliver references. if you're wondering, the show neil makes his debut in is a play called "who's afraid of virginia woolf?" because i felt like it. anyway :D

tell me what you think! kudos and comments are appreciated, and tune in sometime next week for the final chapter!

v.

Chapter Summary

The hardest thing about endings is that they really don't exist.

After all, the story keeps going—this is just a footnote. The thing about letting go is that it always hurts; the thing about moving forward is that it isn't always beautiful, and it isn't always enough.

(But sometimes, it is.)

Chapter Notes

so here it is. this is the first multi-chapter fic i've ever written and completed, and i'd like to think i did a pretty good job with it.

no warnings for this one, except for an implied hate crime, and implied sexual content. :D

regardless of whether you've been following this since day one, or you've waited until it was finished to read it (i get you), thank you for reading, thank you for the comments and the kudos and the tears.

see you on the end notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He gets the call around 4 p.m.

"They want you," is what his friend Molly says, instead of bothering with hello.

"What?" Todd answers, dumbly.

She sighs loudly, as if he's being difficult on purpose. "The editor. The publishing company. You know, the one I work for? The one you sent your draft to? Ring any bells?"

Todd sits up abruptly, almost dropping his cup of coffee in his haste. "What?" he repeats, though this time, disbelief colors his voice. "They want to publish the book? My book?"

"Yes, your book! Are you always this stupid? How did Neil ever marry

you?”

He loves Molly to pieces, he really does - she’s part-time his manager, part-time queer activist, and full-time 5’0 of lesbian chaos, with another foot of no-nonsense attitude - but she can be a bit blunt. Todd tells her so, because he always does, and he can almost physically feel her flicking him in the nose. Also, he's ignoring that last comment.

“Shut up,” he says, without any heat. “I just. Wasn’t expecting it.”

“Well, it’s not so cut and dry,” Molly continues, already distracted. “They want to meet with you, talk about your craft—you know, all that crap about how they can sell your image, you’ll tell them if you want to be more anonymous and etcetera. You’ll have to meet with the editor, a design artist for the cover, and honey, you need to decide on a name.”

Todd closes his eyes, leaning back down on the sofa. They’ve had this conversation many times before, as the months passed by and he wrote, and as he finished the final draft and sent them to multiple editors across the state. He’s never been good with titles; they seem too restrictive, too small for what his poems mean. But he can’t change the whole world while he’s at it, after all. He’s just a poet.

(Yeah, he finally succumbed and admitted it to himself. It’s been nearly seven years since he quit his job at the publishing company and started writing full time—it was long overdue. He still remembers Neil’s face when he finally said it out loud, after a week long writer’s block that was literally driving him insane.

“God, Neil,” he’d snapped, staring at the window of their bedroom with his arms crossed in front of him. “I can’t just—not write and be okay. That’s not how it works. I’m a writer, I’m a *poet*, that’s who I am, and what *am* I if I’m not writing?”

He hadn’t even realized what he’d said until he felt Neil’s arms encircling him, his head coming to rest on Todd’s shoulder. “Regardless of you writing or not,” Neil had said, smiling against his skin, “you’re always my poet.”

“Someone’s getting cheeky,” Todd had grumbled, face flushing. They’ve been together for eighteen years, and Todd still can’t seem to stay mad at him. It’s infuriating.

Neil had twirled him around to face him, eyes bright. “C’mon, Anderson. I know you know that I know those poems you write are

about me."

"That sentence doesn't even remotely make sense," Todd started, and Neil had cut him off with a kiss. While he leaned into it, his heart roared in his chest. His mind told him, *it does, it does, it does. All for him. Always for him.*)

"Todd? You still there?"

Todd blinks. "Yeah, Mols," he says, shaking his head. "Did you say something?"

Molly sighs. "I said don't *panic*, you overthinking moose. No one gives a shit about the title of a poetry book. The poems are what matters."

I do, Todd wants to say. *It has to be perfect. It has to be irreproachable in every way.*

It's a recurring thought. Molly gives him the address and the phone number of the company, and hangs up without saying goodbye. Todd clenches his fist on his lap, and breathes. His therapist told him numerous times that he should recognize his actions for what they are, including his nervous tick of clenching his fist when he feels threatened or anxious, and he can recognize it as a grounding technique, but thinking about that just makes him spiral, so he doesn't.

The apartment is silent. Neil is in rehearsal for a new show he can't say the name of yet, and it's fall, and Todd looks out the window and aches.

He doesn't know what *for*. Cold weather always make him melancholic; the cloudy skies, the quietness of the world, the gusts of wind—they all seem ready to swallow him whole, and most times, he doesn't mind the feeling.

To breathe so deep I'll break, he'd written once. *To have the moon rest on my lungs, raindrops to drown all that I feel. All my loss, all my love, all that I was too afraid to have.*

Maybe the book should be titled *Breathing* . It's the one thing Todd always has to work at, anyway.

He gets up and counts the steps to the kitchen, then back. The coffee cup sits forgotten next to the couch, filling the room with the smell of cold brew. They really should start thinking about moving out—it's

been years, and Todd feels like those rooms are too small to house him anymore. The decorations have changed, the color palettes have been altered, but as much as he loves the little Greenwich apartment, it feels like a window stuck to the past. He and Neil moved in just fresh out of school, eighteen years old and wide-eyed, and Todd can still hear his younger voice echoing from the bedroom if he focuses hard enough. The laughs, the fights, the alcohol and the tears; it all seems to trap the house in a perpetual state of adolescence. And it isn't bad, it doesn't harm them in any way, but.

Todd has been rethinking a lot in the past few years. How to move on. What to let go. And it will be sad, when he brings it up to Neil. They'll fight about it, and Todd will probably spend the night at Knox and Charlie's place when they do, but he won't back down. They were never meant to live the rest of their lives there. It would be childish to hope so.

There are still new memories to make.

Like the engagement ring hidden under Neil's pillow, that Todd isn't supposed to know about. Like the dreams he's been having, about open spaces and large rooms, and children's names. Like the vows and promises they'll still get to come up with.

Greenwich has been their home for a long time, but it was never a forever kind of thing.

Todd eyes the space on the wall above their sofa, wistfully. It used to be empty - the walls are thin, and Neil might have learned Morse Code on a whim to communicate with their neighbor, Lana, when they were too tired to speak. But Lana died nearly two years ago, coming back from a Ballroom competition. She was a House Mother to the bitter end - told her children to leave the moment she saw the men approaching, and went down covering for them.

Neil and Todd don't talk too much about it. Eventually Neil commissioned a painting from Madalena to hang up on that space of the wall, to keep himself from knocking if the fact slipped from memory. Looking at it feels - bittersweet. It always knocks the breath out of Todd, sometimes. How something can be there, and then not be there; how being in love is so simple, but being something that stays is the one thing in life you'll always have to work at.

Staying is a concept Todd is still coming to terms with. It was never so much as not leaving, but growing roots, finding home. He never

thought he'd have that. It's been years and years, but he's still trying to get used to the idea of his own happiness, his own safety.

("I don't know what to do with it," he'd told his therapist once. "I can't understand it. I know what to do with pain, with anger, with sadness - it all goes on the paper, it all drains away from me. But all this warmth, all this love, all this happiness. Where do I put it?"

She'd run her hands through her short hair, messing it up in a way that reminded Todd of Neil. "Writing from pain can be cathartic," she'd said, "but you don't need to suffer to make good art, Todd. Your happiness is just as real as the other things you write about. The love you feel is just as much a part of you as your sorrow. They're not mutually exclusive. I know it's always scary to hear this - but you're human. You're allowed to be complicated.")

Todd walks over to his and Neil's bedroom, hands clammy where he's hiding them in the pockets of his sweatpants. The room seems to always be messy just for the sake of it, and he nearly slips on a pair of Neil's socks just by stepping inside. He knows every inch of it, every breath it has felt, every tear shed in that beaten bedspread. Eighteen years.

More time than he could ever hope for, Todd realizes, with a certain amount of sadness.

He sits down on the bed and lifts up Neil's pillow, eyeing that little velvety black box that's been sitting under it for the past six weeks. There's a smile on his face, and an old hurt aching in his chest.

Today is April eleventh, nineteen seventy-seven, Todd thinks to himself, letting the pillow fall back to its place. He runs his fingers through his hair, which is starting to curl where they fall in front of his eyes. *And I'm anxious. I'm afraid. And most of all, I am happy.*

And, not but. He's allowed more than one at the same time.

It's been six years since he's heard from Mr. Keating.

The hardest thing about endings is that they really don't exist.

After all, the story keeps going—this is just a footnote. The thing about letting go is that it always hurts; the thing about moving forward is that it isn't always beautiful, and it isn't always enough.

(But sometimes, it is.)

So Todd's debut novel gets published on a windy November evening, and he goes out with his friends and they all get drunk like they're nineteen again, stumbling home at the cusp of dawn, and yelling at each other from across the street when Knox and Todd run too fast and leave Neil behind with Charlie, who slumps down on the ground and starts snoring. He gets a call from Jeffrey, all the way up in New Jersey, and his seven year old niece squeals at him on the phone, even though she's not really sure what's happening. His parents don't call, of course, and Todd doesn't even notice until Neil brings it up, about a month later, and when he tells Neil so, he means it.

Neil's show schedule is so hectic that he doesn't get the chance to read the book until early December, when their street is lined with frost and the Menorah stands on the windowsill, just two lights in. When Todd gets home that day, it's to an armful of crying Neil, all sobs and promises and the overdue marriage proposals he's been dreaming about for the past six months.

"My love, my soul," Neil gasps, holding Todd's face between his hands, as if he can't believe what he's seeing. "You've no idea of all the ways in which you've saved me."

The book is called *bittersweet beginnings and other things to fall in love with*, and the dedicatory reads, "To my Puck. Always and forever."

They don't make it to the bed.

And Todd Anderson has been out of Welton for over nine million minutes, though he doesn't know that. He stopped counting somewhere between making a home and letting himself fall.

He hasn't talked to Mr. Keating in almost seven years, but he still has the mailing address. So he wraps up a copy of his book and mails it, and he doesn't expect a response. On the inside cover, just under the title of the book, there's a note in a scratchy handwriting that never did evolve.

O' Captain, My Captain;

Guess there was a poet in me after all.

Todd.

Chapter End Notes

I'VE BEEN REMINISCING A LOT ABOUT ENDINGS, OKAY. took many quotes out of another wip that has nothing to do with this. am emotional. love todd anderson more than anything.

i'm not gonna say this is the end, because i know myself and it probably isn't, so i didn't want to go out with a huge bang. sometimes simplicity is key. idk how much dps i'll write in the coming months, but i have a bunch of original works that i'd love to share, if y'all would like it!

as always - kudos and comments are very much appreciated! follow me on twitter @queenofvoIts , and i love you all. thank you again.

End Notes

sooo yeah! i hope y'all liked that! this will have a couple more chapters as far as i'm concerned, but bear with me as i write 'em. tell me what you think!! any comment will make me cry tbh

hope y'all are staying safe! wash your hands! stay home! pet your cat! in the meantime - follow me on twitter @ bluerotunda where i talk about books a lot.

<3

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